

VZCZCXYZ0005
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #3435/01 3281512
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
R 241512Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1170
INFO RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RHMFISS/CNO WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/FBI WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 0249
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO
RUEHJP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

S E C R E T BOGOTA 003435

SIPDIS
NOFORN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/11/24
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [EAID](#) [SNAR](#) [MOPS](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ADMIRAL ROUGHHEAD'S DEC 2-6 VISIT TO COLOMBIA

CLASSIFIED BY: Brian A. Nichols, Deputy Chief of Mission, Department
of State, EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Your upcoming visit to Bogota and Cartagena is an opportunity to reassure the Colombians of our commitment to their fight against illegal drugs and illegal armed groups. Colombians have begun to perceive our decision not to be baited by Venezuela's bellicose rhetoric and trade freeze as a failure to stand by an ally. Your visit will be a welcome sign of our senior engagement and commitment to the bilateral relationship. President Uribe's final decision whether to push for reelection remains the central chord of Colombian politics and will define the tone of congressional elections in March and the presidential elections in May. Bilateral relations with Colombia remain solid but will be tested by our handling of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the regional sensitivities to the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). Despite improving performance on human rights throughout Plan Colombia, there are continuing abuses and potential for backsliding, especially in the Colombian Army. The Colombian Navy was rocked in November by the surprising reversal of an all but certain conviction against a rear admiral suspected of aiding narco-traffickers. After rousing success against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2008, progress against the guerrilla organization has plateaued; there are few prospects for peace in the near term. Post has begun implementing the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) -- a follow-on to Plan Colombia -- with greater focus on expanding state services in Colombia's ungoverned spaces where illegal armed groups and the illicit economy flourish. End Summary.

COLOMBIA IN TRANSITION

12. (SBU) Embassy Bogota welcomes the visit of Admiral Gary Roughead, United States Chief of Naval Operations on December 2-6.

Colombian Naval Commander Admiral Guillermo Barrera Hurtado and Colombian Armed Forces Commander Freddy Padilla de Leon will also warmly welcome your visit to Colombia. Colombia made a dramatic rebound from near-failed state to stable democracy over the last ten years. Murder and kidnapping rates have dropped dramatically, while rule of law has strengthened through major judicial reforms. While Colombia still experiences serious problems with illegal armed groups, the conflict has ceased to be a threat to Colombia's national security and sovereignty.

13. (SBU) Colombia's turnaround can be attributed to improvements in overall security, but further progress depends on resolving chronic issues such as high social inequality and land tenure. Colombia has made significant inroads in confronting narco-terrorism, but drug trafficking organizations and illegal armed groups still operate in large parts of the country, including along borders. Colombia is finally feeling the effects of the global economic crisis, though the impact has been lessened by sound fiscal and monetary policies that have attracted foreign investment. Growth rates are nil for 2009 but the GOC predicts 2.5% growth next year. Poverty rates have also decreased, though unemployment remains a major problem. About 60% of the economy remains mired in the informal sector.

REELECTIONS AND ELECTIONS

14. (C) The Colombian Congress passed a law in September permitting a referendum on whether President Alvaro Uribe may stand for a third term in the presidential elections on May 30, 2010. The Constitutional Court must now rule on the referendum process and its impact on the Constitution, a decision that may not come until March 2010. If the Court rules in Uribe's favor, a referendum must be held. Uribe seldom speaks publicly of the referendum, characterizing it as a grassroots initiative of Colombian citizens. His popularity remains at 65% to 70% after more than seven years in office. Privately, Uribe is doing everything possible to perpetuate his presidential career. Elections to replace the entire Congress (166 Representatives and 102 Senators) will be held on March 14. We expect the elections to run smoothly overall but are concerned about certain areas of violence and the influence of illicit funds during the campaign period.

BILATERAL AND REGIONAL RELATIONS

15. (C) Colombia has been a staunch U.S. ally against the threats of narco-trafficking and terrorism. We continue to enjoy a robust extradition relationship, though we were disappointed at the Supreme Court's decision to deny our requests to extradite the FARC operatives charged with taking hostage or attempting to harm U.S. citizens. Colombia is our fourth largest export market in the region and a growing destination for U.S. investment. Our close relations have tended to isolate Colombia in the region, especially with neo-populist governments such as Venezuela, which regularly paints Colombia as an agent of the United States. This was underscored by the regional tensions raised by the DCA. Despite our assertions that the DCA is strictly a bilateral issue, the GOC views the agreement as a strategic deterrent against President Hugo Chavez. The Colombians are on the verge of restoring relations with Ecuador but have failed in efforts to enlist Brazil to offset the rhetoric of Chavez. The Colombians have recently engaged in "security diplomacy," providing training and assistance to neighbors (such as Mexico and Haiti) suffering from drug trafficking and organized crime as well as to the international effort in Afghanistan via a deployment with Operation Enduring Freedom as early as the end of 2009.

VENEZUELA ON THE MIND

¶6. (SBU) Colombian officials worry that Venezuela poses a growing military, economic, and covert threat. The GOC has sounded alarms in response to Venezuela's arms purchases, all but open support for the FARC, and bellicose rhetoric -- including Chavez' statements to "prepare for war" and refusal to meet with that "mobster" Uribe in Brazilian brokered talks. Caracas has blocked imports from Colombia, leading to border area confrontations and unrest. Bilateral trade, once thought to be of sufficient volume to prevent conflict, has fallen over 70% in the last year, leaving local observers concerned that the constraints preventing conflict between the two states are dwindling. Colombia has appealed to the UNSC, OAS and WTO for help, but seen little response. Despite these incidents, we see no evidence that either side is actively preparing for hostilities. However, as tensions along the border rise and perceptions skew, there is a small risk that a local incident could spiral out of control. Real or not, the perception of the threat posed by Venezuela has changed Colombia's worldview, causing them to seek ever greater assurances of our friendship and support.

¶7. (SBU) While Colombians generally understand U.S. political realities associated with a vote on the FTA, resignation has grown within the government, business and academic communities over the lack of action on the accord. The GOC remains committed to the agreement's passage, but worries that its efforts will turn out to be unsuccessful. Business community members believe that long-term inaction on the FTA will be detrimental to U.S.-Colombian relations. The great majority of organized labor is opposed to free trade agreements and argues that the GOC needs to do more to respect worker rights and to protect unionists from violence. In 2009, 34 unionists have been murdered as of November 17, which is a downward trend from the 49 murders in all of 2008. President Uribe publicly adheres to the commitment President Obama made in their June 29 meeting to move the FTA forward in the U.S. Congress once labor and human rights issues are adequately addressed.

HUMAN RIGHTS

¶8. (SBU) By nearly all measures, the human rights situation in Colombia has improved over the last ten years. Serious human rights concerns remain, however, especially with regard to the Colombian military. Last year's exposure of military "false positives," in which unarmed civilians were murdered and presented as combat deaths, led to the dismissal of 51 members of the Colombian Army. We are concerned with the military's commitment to investigating these types of cases and its cooperation with the Prosecutor General's office. The Prosecutor General's Office is currently processing more than 1,000 cases of extrajudicial executions; prosecutions have been slow but there is progress. We are working with the Colombian military to improve their respect for human rights as they carry out security operations. Impunity for human rights violations and past crimes carried out by paramilitary and guerrilla groups is a serious concern. The GOC regularly stigmatizes NGOs as supporters of terrorist organizations, which human rights groups claim fuels growing death threats against them. Revelations that Colombian intelligence and law enforcement entities carried out illegal surveillance against human rights groups, unionists and political opponents have also undermined the GOC's credibility on human rights. Colombia has over three million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Consternation Over Corruption in the Navy

¶9. (SBU) A high profile narco-corruption case against a retired rear admiral appears poised for dismissal amidst controversy. Guillermo ArangoBacci was forced to retire in 2007 based on evidence that he had conspired with drug traffickers to help them evade U.S. and Colombian interdiction patrols. Admiral Barrera took the additional step of referring ArangoBacci's case to the civilian Prosecutor General's Office for criminal charges; the case was nearing a guilty verdict by mid-2009. On November 3, however, a new prosecutor assigned to the case petitioned the Supreme Court to absolve ArangoBacci on grounds that the investigation failed to prove the admiral's guilt. To make matters worse, both the Prosecutor General's Office and the Inspector General's Office denounced the Admiral Barrera and other senior naval officers for falsifying evidence to frame ArangoBacci. Ambassador Brownfield

publicly defended Admiral Barrera's actions in referring the matter to the civilian courts, which drew accusations of interference from one Supreme Court magistrate and the Colombian press. However, it laid down the marker that we believe allegations of military corruption must be investigated--preferably in civilian courts.

CONFLICT STALLED, PEACE DELAYED

¶10. (S/NF) The GOC made dazzling progress against the FARC in 2008: the deaths of three Secretariat members, the liberation of 15 prized hostages, including three Americans, and record high desertions. Progress in 2009 has been sluggish, however, with the FARC carrying out asymmetrical attacks on selective soft targets as the Colombian military tries to grind them down in a slow war of attrition. Some analysts have also pointed to lower operations tempo due to local commanders' concern of being accused of human rights abuses. Sensitive reporting suggests the GOC is quietly probing the FARC and National Liberation Army (ELN) to open a dialogue, though these efforts appear to be far from fruitful. We do not expect any serious progress on this issue until after the elections; the guerrilla groups will likely wait to see whether Uribe will repeat in office before considering a broader peace process.

THE COLOMBIA STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

¶11. (SBU) To consolidate the gains of Plan Colombia, we have developed the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI), which meshes with Colombia's own National Consolidation Plan (PNC). Our efforts initially focus on three priority areas of on-going conflict, drug trafficking and social marginalization. PNC/CSDI has prioritized addressing the lack of state presence that enables coca production and illegal armed groups, and seeks to establish state presence in strategic, under-governed parts of the country. The plan is centered on increasing territorial control in these areas to provide security for communities; to achieve permanent coca eradication; to transfer security responsibility to the police; to provide a wide range of socio-economic services to address the root causes of marginalization; and to improve the justice sector to mitigate illegality. A major challenge to implementation is achieving strong, effective civilian leadership of the PNC. The head of Social Action (Accion Social), Colombia's development agency, is the titular head of the PNC effort. Civilian agencies

have been reluctant, however, to devote their budgets to the effort, often leaving the Ministry of Defense organizationally in front. Other obstacles include the need for a comprehensive GOC security strategy to transition from military to police in "consolidated" territories; more clarity on a post-eradication strategy; stronger presence of the justice sector in CSDI areas; and increased funding support for PNC ministries in the GOC budget.

CARTAGENA AND COCAINE

¶12. (SBU) Cartagena holds many keys to the issues that will play a major role in Colombia's future. With security issues largely resolved, the effectiveness of our CSDI efforts will likely become

evident in the Montes de Maria zone near Cartagena within a year. Drug traffickers have increasingly turned to seaborne shipments of drugs either in go-fast boats, self-propelled semi-submersible boats or hidden in commercial cargo. Maritime counter-narcotics interdiction will be ever more vital to our efforts to combat drug trafficking. Our joint efforts had unparalleled success in 2008, with record seizures of cocaine on the high seas, which coupled with a record year in eradication led to double digit increases in the price of cocaine in the U.S and decreases in its purity.

BROWNFIELD